United Nations A/AC.198/2002/7

General Assembly

Distr.: General
14 February 2002

Original: English

Committee on Information
Twenty-fourth session
22 April-2 May 2002

Activities of the Joint United Nations Information Committee in 2001

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

The Joint United Nations Information Committee, the subsidiary body of the Administrative Committee on Coordination (ACC) responsible for coordination in the field of public information, held its twenty-seventh session in July 2001. It addressed issues relating to the development of web communications, the communications strategies for the World Summit on Sustainable Development, poverty eradication and the human immunodeficiency virus/acquired immunodeficiency syndrome, as well as its own future. In October 2001, as part of its review, ACC, now renamed the United Nations System Chief Executive Board for Coordination, decided to do away with permanent subsidiary bodies and instead rely on flexible, substance-driven and ad hoc arrangements. Consequently, as of January 2002, inter-agency coordination in the field of public information and communication will take place through a new informal and flexible mechanism, the United Nations Communications Group.

02-25473 (E) 040302

I. Introduction

1. In its resolution 46/73 B of 11 December 1991, the General Assembly requested the Secretary-General to submit reports of the Joint United Nations Information Committee to the Committee on Information at its consecutive sessions. The present report, which covers the activities of the Committee during 2001, has been prepared in response to that request.

2. The Joint United Nations Information Committee held its twenty-seventh session in Geneva, at the headquarters of the World Intellectual Property Organization, from 10 to 12 July 2001, under the chairmanship of Tore Brevik, Director of Communications and Public Information of the United Nations Environment Programme. Directors of information and officials from 27 United Nations bodies, including specialized agencies and related organizations, attended the session. The Joint Committee considered a variety of topics related to inter-agency cooperation in public information and communications matters. The report of the session was submitted to the High-level Committee on Programmes of the Administrative Committee on Coordination (see ACC/2001/13). Highlights of discussions and follow-up action on decisions taken at the twenty-seventh session of the Committee are described below.

II. Development of web communications

3. The Joint Committee held a broad-based discussion of the issues relating to web communications. A majority of the members of the Committee felt that it was important to create an Internet branding for the United Nations as a whole, which could be accomplished through the top-level domain <.un>. The Joint Committee noted that the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) had not scheduled the adjunction of any new generic top-level domains in the foreseeable future and that the United Nations system apparently did not currently qualify for a <.un> country code top-level domain managed by the International Organization for Standardization (ISO). Further, members of the Joint Committee felt that, although that process could be long, complicated and possibly costly, it would ultimately create a powerful branding for the United Nations system and restrict the possibility of misuse of the United Nations name by others, as the domain would be managed by the Organization. Regarding the <.int> top-level domain name, which was available for use by all United Nations organizations, many members of the Joint Committee felt that that top-level domain name could not strengthen the image of the Organization as it was also available to other international treaty organizations that were not part of the United Nations system. The Joint Committee agreed to ask its secretariat to look further into the possibility of creating an Internet branding for the United Nations system as a whole, including the possibility of creating a <.un> generic top-level domain name with ICANN or a <.un> country code top-level domain with ISO.

4. The Joint Committee expressed support for the call by ACC and the Committee on Information for the establishment of a central Internet portal for the United Nations, encompassing all web sites of the organizations of the system. It was proposed that consideration be given to redesigning the existing "Global issues" web page on the www.un.org web site into a portal page to provide the links to all the relevant sites within the United Nations system. The Department of Public

Information was requested to coordinate the portal, with a view to developing a system-wide search facility.

5. Members of the Joint Committee also exchanged views and experiences on the issue of web journalism and the effect which the online availability of their publications had on their hard copy sales. About one half of the organizations present at the session created publications specifically for the web, but many more had their sales publications partially or fully available online. With one exception, all members of the Joint Committee reported that the online availability of their sales publications either kept the sales figures stable or even led to small increases in sales. On the other hand, online availability of non-sale print materials resulted in far greater circulation figures, especially in the field, at lower production and distribution costs.

III. Communications strategy for the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development

6. With the participation of the Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs via videoconference, in addition to two colleagues from the communications divisions of the bilateral donor agencies of two countries members of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, the Joint Committee discussed the communications aspects of preparations for the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development. It was agreed that the issues before the Summit touched upon the mandates of most member organizations and therefore provided an excellent opportunity for system-wide cooperation and coordination of outreach efforts. Those efforts should bring together the environment and development agendas and spur the active engagement of civil society actors in the pre-Summit process at the country level. That would, in turn, generate a constructive, broad-based debate on all the underlying issues and help identify meaningful solutions to the challenge of sustainable development in a globalized world. To coordinate these efforts, the Joint Committee agreed to establish a communications task force to develop a joint communications strategy and monitor its implementation, along the lines of a similar group that coordinated the communications campaign leading to the 2001 special session of the General Assembly on human immunodeficiency virus/acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (HIV/AIDS).

IV. Communications strategy for the global campaign for poverty eradication

7. With the participation of the Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs and the two colleagues from the communications divisions of the bilateral donor agencies, the Joint Committee also considered the communications strategy for the global campaign for poverty eradication, envisaged in the final document adopted at the conclusion of the 2000 special session of the General Assembly for the five-year review of the outcome of the World Summit for Social Development. It was agreed that, although many organizations of the system were already implementing programmes in support of the global campaign, additional efforts were needed to communicate a joint, coordinated message by the United

Nations system of organizations, speaking with one voice in advocating action for achievement, by the target date of 2015, of the international development goals outlined in the Millennium Declaration. This campaign also provided an excellent opportunity to further explore the ways and means of renewing cooperation and undertaking joint advocacy efforts with the bilateral development agencies outside the United Nations system.

V. Joint United Nations communications strategy on HIV/AIDS

8. With the participation of the Deputy Executive Director of the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), the Joint Committee discussed the ways and means of addressing the communications challenges in the follow-up to the 2001 special session of the General Assembly on HIV/AIDS, namely: (a) to increase political will and leadership to fight HIV/AIDS and to reduce the stigma of the disease; (b) to continue to move HIV/AIDS beyond the public health sector to become a political issue and a development challenge; (c) to fight fatalism and find a balance between communicating the seriousness of the problem and motivating all actors to continue looking for solutions; and (d) to place the issue of funding into perspective. Members of the Joint Committee agreed that the level of cooperation achieved among the organizations of the system through the communications steering group on HIV/AIDS, established in the lead-up to the special session, was a model for future cooperation among the organizations of the system in matters of mutual concern. In view of the importance of keeping the issue of HIV/AIDS on the global agenda, it was also agreed that the steering group would continue to function as a coordinating mechanism for the follow-up to the special session.

VI. Inter-agency cooperation in the field of public information and the future of the Joint Committee

9. In the light of the review of ACC and its subsidiary machinery launched by the Secretary-General in 1998 as part of his overall reform, the Joint Committee discussed the future joint coordination arrangements in the field of public information and communications. The Secretary of ACC took part in the discussions. Members of the Joint Committee agreed on the need to re-energize inter-agency cooperation in the field of public information, to make it more dynamic, issue-oriented, results-based, flexible and modern, and they developed a series of proposals aimed at reaching that objective.

VII. New developments since the July 2001 session of the Joint Committee

10. At its October 2001 meeting, ACC, now renamed the United Nations System Chief Executive Board for Coordination (CEB), pursued its review of the functioning of the inter-agency machinery. The summary of its conclusions (ACC/2001/4) is available on the web at ceb.unsystem.org. As part of the new approach outlined in that document, CEB would not have any permanent subsidiary

bodies (except for the two high-level committees on Programmes and Management). In all areas thus far covered by permanent subsidiary bodies, such as the Joint Committee, where the need for organizing and managing inter-agency cooperation remained or needed to be strengthened, CEB would rely on flexible, substance-driven and ad hoc arrangements. In particular, work methods would be adapted in order to promote better peer dialogue and interaction and ensure greater focus on substance, so that inter-agency meetings could be utilized to address selected policy issues of major concern to the system as a whole. In addition, the new arrangements both envisaged that CEB could ask relevant inter-agency networks to carry out certain tasks on its behalf, and such networks could also bring issues and policy concerns to the attention of CEB.

11. Following those developments, and on the basis of extensive discussions during the twenty-seventh session of the Joint Committee, the interim head of the Department of Public Information circulated a series of proposals on 18 December 2001. Those proposals were developed in consultation with the outgoing chairman of the Committee, and the Director of Information of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, who had been expected to succeed him as chairperson of the successor body to the Joint Committee. They outlined the new arrangements for future inter-agency activities that should lead to a more substantive, flexible and task-oriented approach in promoting coordination in the field of public information, and were endorsed by the heads of public information and communications of the organizations of the United Nations system.

12. As a result of those proposals, a new informal body, the United Nations Communications Group, composed of the heads of public information and communications of the organizations of the United Nations system, was established as of 1 January 2002. The principle of a fixed annual session has been retained as a means of promoting a common sense of purpose within the information community of the United Nations system and as a means of facilitating networking. The annual session will rotate among duty stations and will be chaired by the head of public information/communications of the host organization. A concise agenda, focusing on broad cross-cutting themes and issues of common interest to all organizations, will be arrived at through a consultative process. In view of the importance of the relationship with civil society, the work of the Non-Governmental Liaison Service will continue to be reviewed at the session.

13. In addition to the annual meeting, the United Nations Communications Group continues to hold weekly meetings at Headquarters under the chairmanship of the head of the Department of Public Information and with the participation of New York-based representatives of all organizations of the United Nations system, to provide a regular forum for consultation and coordination on communications policy and issues as well as on joint strategies and programmes. The secretariat of the United Nations Communications Group remains within the Department of Public Information.

14. To develop and coordinate the implementation of joint communications strategies on priority issues, often in the lead-up to major conferences and other events, the United Nations Communications Group will establish task forces involving the organizations active in the preparation of the activity concerned. This will be a flexible mechanism, with the frequency of meetings adjusted to specific needs and with sunset provisions, to be applied upon completion of the objectives at

hand. Two such task forces are currently active: one on financing for development and another on the World Summit for Sustainable Development.

VIII. Observations

15. As the Joint Committee ceased to exist on 31 December 2001, and in view of the informal nature of the new body, the United Nations Communications Group, the reporting obligation referred to in paragraph 1 of the present report no longer applies. Nevertheless, the Committee on Information will continue to be kept fully apprised of inter-agency cooperation in the field of public information on a regular basis.

16. For the future, it is expected that these new flexible and informal arrangements for inter-agency coordination in the field of communications will contribute to building a communications culture throughout the United Nations system as a whole.